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IMAGINATION AND FACT IN VOICE CULTURE

By FREDERIC W. ROOT¹

Reference is often made to confusion and inadequacy of vocal method and the lack of agreement among its professors. There have, however, been fashions in voice teaching which have brought temporary approaches to unanimity, at least in appearance.

There was the florid method, in which the practice of scales and passages was the main dependence of all teachers. There was a rapidly fluctuating scientific period. For a time breathing was everything and the phrase "Chi sa respirare sa cantare" had its vogue.

Then came the treatment of vocal registers following upon Garcia's invention of the laryngoscope. Then the teaching of Helmholtz and other scientists swept the field and teachers sought the new knowledge and used its phraseology at least enough to make them feel up-to-date.

Again, anatomy and physiology were pushed to the front, mostly by the medical profession, with a great show of authority exerting a wide influence upon voice teaching.

Each of these fashions has been accompanied by much experimental teaching and theoretical discourse in the music journals, teachers' associations and the studios.

Meanwhile the human voice has remained as ever the same elusive, baffling, capricious, chameleon-like endowment, now appearing to justify the theorist in his "discoveries," and now leading him a wild goose chase; at one moment seeming to be a simple and natural gift and at another the most complex of problems.

So nothing beyond a few obvious elementary considerations has become established.

All fashions and discoveries have been in turn discredited. Investigation, however, has continued to press forward. Pressing forward at the present writing consists in looking backward at that shadowy object of veneration the "old Italian Method."

¹Mr. Root's illness prevented him from reading proof of his article. He died on November 8.—*Ed.*

It is interesting to note the extent to which antiquity can lend glamour to even commonplace things. A ruin, if it is only a pile of rubbish, is romantic if it is old enough. A useless book may be a treasure on account of its age. Old cracked paintings and dim frescoes appear as caricatures to one who does not behold them through the mists of a remote past.

The Italian singers of the first half of the 18th century studied their art leisurely and gave plenty of time to the development of their voices; their language predisposed their throats to musical utterance; their temperament was warm and expressive; their climate was genial; public taste inclined to euphony and sensuous beauty; singers had not the temptation to force their voices, the instrumental accompaniments being light and the method being florid song rather than declamatory utterance; more than all, every professional singer was prepared as a cultivated musician, one who could improvise and compose as well as vocalize—to use his mind as well as his body.

With all these advantages it would be a wonder if some expert singers had not been developed. But there were apparently very few such in comparison to all who undertook the study; and it is doubtful if these eminent ones excelled or even equalled the best we have to-day. But they have the glamour of antiquity, and their fame is enhanced by certain legends which continue to pass current. That epoch has figured for a century as the golden age of song, and those singers as exemplars of a wonderful art which has been lost to the world.

The fashion of to-day is the attempt to assign definite outlines to this “old Italian method” and to advocate its re-establishment for vocal education.

The most authoritative utterance upon this subject which has appeared—authoritative because of the literary skill with which it is presented and because of the high standing of the journal which gives it currency—discredits all mechanical discoveries and devices as they are at present applied to voice culture and advocates the instinctive, direct, “natural” treatment which is supposed to be the sole reliance of the early Italians.

Here is the argument which the writer above referred to¹ and many others are putting forth to-day with the air of giving the solution of a difficult problem:

Voice is a natural function and to interfere with Nature in the cultivation of it leads to disaster. The vocal organs act

¹Voice Culture: Past and Present, by David C. Taylor. *THE MUSICAL QUARTERLY*, July, 1915.

spontaneously in response to thought and feeling; hence to attempt to guide their actions mechanically is an error. Tones of voice vary according to the vocalists' imagination without consciousness of mechanical processes; therefore the ear is the only proper means of guiding tone.

Hence cultivation of the voice should be accomplished with no reference to the vocal organs which originate and control tone, but only to the tone itself, forming this upon an ideal of quality and relying upon instinct and unconscious effort for the physical action required.

This must be an attractive proposition especially to a teacher who has difficult cases to deal with. He need no longer study to invent means to overcome vocal defects, nor worry over results. His course is to demand beautiful tones from his pupil, giving him models with his own voice, and then watch beneficent Nature dispose of defects, obliterate wrong habits and develop a fine even scale.

This plan seems to contemplate the exceptional rather than the average pupil, and the unusual rather than the common conditions under which the training is conducted. It would work well, certainly much better than imperfect physical analysis, with a gifted pupil whose antecedents were such as to endow him with fine, æsthetic perception, one who had established no bad habits, and if, furthermore, the teacher were one whose tones the pupil might profitably imitate, and the pupil were much with the teacher.

But the large majority of those who study singing have imperfect ideals of tone, some obstinate habits, and are taught by those whose voices are different from their own—as when a man teaches a woman, or a woman a man.

Shall we say that only the gifted ones may be taught singing? Shall we conclude that only one whose voice is the proper pattern for a pupil may give instruction to that pupil? Shall we assume that where a pupil has a falsely produced tone we may never point out the physical condition which vitiates the tone?

Let us contemplate a few actual cases:

Misses A, B and C had voices far above the average—in other words, they all produced what were generally regarded as beautiful tones and they had no thought of the physical process. They heard much good singing in concert and opera; they studied for musicianship with piano, etc., and were closely pursuing the “old Italian method” as defined by its prophets. Yet the progress of these young ladies was at a standstill because of defects which hampered and discouraged them.

Miss A could take her upper tones only by forcing them; any attempt at diminished power was attended by a grating sound or a sudden stoppage.

Miss B, as she added power to her tones in the swell, experienced a nervous tension like that which one feels in trying to lift something of which he has an imperfect hold, and her voice then took on something of a hard and hollow sound.

Miss C, with a voice which was entitled to high C, could not by any form of exertion force it above F.

Now each of these typical cases might possibly have been set right by strict adherence to the natural or idealistic method which forbids attention to mechanism. But it is extremely doubtful if it could have been thus accomplished within the limits and under the conditions of an ordinary course of lessons.

As it was, Miss A was easily taught to lower her tongue for her high notes—she had unconsciously acquired the habit of making the back of the tongue rise as the voice ascended through the compass.

Miss B learned without delay to raise the soft palate properly—the natural co-ordination of tongue and palate had become lost.

Miss C was made to control the position of her larynx which, because of forced registers in childhood, was prone to follow in singing the course which it takes in the act of swallowing—to close entirely.

The sincere devotees of the “old Italian method,” especially those who have witnessed disaster in “scientific” procedure, will immediately call to mind all sorts of contortions and vocal monstrosities in connection with the effort to regulate consciously, a singer’s tongue, palate or larynx. True, all these grotesqueries are possible, and, as competent handling of this method is rare, they are even probable.

But the ideal of beautiful tone is not the exclusive possession of the old school. One who regulates the position and action of the chest, lips, jaw, tongue, etc. in teaching may have the same and may seem to himself to give the pupil aid toward grasping this ideal by showing him the result of tone formed by a different adjustment of the physical organism from that which had become habitual and had seemed “natural.”

“In his daily practicing the student strove” (says our advocate of the old Italian method) “through repeated singing of the same passages, to bring his voice into conformity with his mental conception.”

He would probably add that the proper effect of this practice should be expected only after the ear had been trained and the mental conception developed; but how this mental preparation is to be effected he does not say. His arguments repudiate the idea that the development of a true ideal of tone may be based upon a previous regulation of the physical action of tone production.

The majority of successful voice teachers are not willing to allow such manifestations of untrained mentality as heavings of the chest and contortions of the tongue in vocalization to await an indefinite method of correction. They are accustomed to regulate these things at once and then begin their quest for the ideal.

No one will deny that the mind is the determining factor in singing as in every other field of human activity. It is obvious, too, that the mind operates on different planes, dominating the material as well as the spiritual activities. To what extent mind's reactions are from spirit to matter, or from matter to spirit, in any given case is a subject for debate. We wish *mens sana in corpore sano*, but in a specific case we must decide whether the body or the mind shall receive first attention in order that both may be rightly cared for.

The "old Italian" plan of operation as recommended to us decides that mental concepts of tone subsequently ratified by sensation should be the sole reliance, vague and uncertain as is the mentality in most cases.

Teaching according to this plan appeals to a native taste and refinement of nature, which the pupil may not have, and depends upon that to guide the action of the vocal organs. If this does not produce satisfactory results there is recourse to imitation, another doubtful means of progress.

One who knows how to regulate the physical action required for a given tone quality can appeal to the mind more directly. The old method tells the pupil to employ a certain ideal of tone evolved from his own nature or sought through imitation, and the physical organs will act to produce a certain tonal effect. The modern method arranges the vocal mechanism to produce that effect, and from the sensation and sound of tone thus produced establishes the mental concept which then becomes the guide.

It is unreasonable to assume, as does the writer whose article we are considering, that the singer whose tone is developed by the aid of mechanical directions will thereafter always sing mechanically. Any modern singer who has within him the possibilities

of expressive vocalization is glad to roam the fields of song with all the inspiration claimed for the school of antiquity. In addition to this he may have a knowledge of the vocal process which will guard him from the errors of fatuous experiment and soaring ambitions.

In music we like what we are used to. Commenting upon the popular appreciation of new music a well-known composer remarked: "People never like a thing that they have not heard before." Thus writers of the successful light operas are usually criticised for being "reminiscent," an essential condition of immediate popularity.

One who has become accustomed to a sharp toned piano finds the mellow tones of a new instrument unsatisfactory. Some of the most beautiful voices that our concert stage has known are condemned because the ear of the commentator had accepted a different kind of tone as the model. A teacher occasionally finds after a period of up-hill work with a voice that the trouble is because of an ideal of tone in the pupil's mind which differs from the one he is trying to establish. Fond parents and friends may tell Sophronia that she does not "sing as well as she used to" because something sharp and throaty has been taken out of her voice.

Conception of ideal or beautiful tone is something shifting and various. It may serve an artistic purpose or it may lead astray. On the other hand, a tone produced with a certain position and action of the vocal organs is mechanically right, and you must bring your notions of tonal effect into conformity with that fact. In due time the personal note, the singer's own contribution to quality and expression, avails to color the tones so produced, and the mechanical aspects of tone by which the voice was "placed" do not obtrude themselves.

The efforts of singers to put this personal note into singing—to make the voice beautiful and expressive after the old Italian plan while the tones are produced with uncorrected faults of mechanism—are in some degree grotesque or pitiful. Of course no good teacher will allow such an exhibition; he will assert that vocalization is not in the old Italian method (if he be an advocate of it) until faults are eliminated. He is likely to decide, as do many teachers of the old school, that a pupil is not to sing songs until after one or two years of work for tone with scales, etc. This is a decree under which modern pupils are likely to be restive. And it is generally unnecessary.

The training of singers in those early times was, so far as we know, mostly for professional purposes, and they submitted to

rigors of discipline that would discourage nine-tenths of our pupils of to-day. Our "accomplished" young ladies are not willing to confine themselves exclusively to scales and vocalizes for any great length of time, and we must find a more direct way to give them something to show for their labors.

Our author says: "Of the many puzzling questions presented by the history of voice culture none is more baffling than the reason for the abandonment of the old Italian method." The reason seems very plain to the present writer. Conditions and objects of vocal study are so different in modern times that voice teachers would starve to death if they adhered strictly to the old method as it is now described.

Nobody does so adhere. The most bigoted advocate of the "purely instinctive process," if he is a successful teacher and not simply a coach, will be found making surreptitious excursions into the domain of mechanical action—giving directions as to the action of lips, tongue, chest, etc.—thus taking the first steps in the "abandonment of the old Italian method."

The method of voice training which lays foundations by regulating mechanical action is a difficult, even dangerous, one to handle if administered by any but a teacher who has mastered it.

Those who know certain facts concerning the mechanism of tone without knowing their relationship and interdependence are likely after a while to find themselves in a tangle with their teaching. It is generally such as these who are accused of ruining voices. To them the preachments of old Italian method are heartily recommended.

There is much to be said in favor of this *laissez-faire* course in the case of a large proportion of those who undertake to teach singing. It is better to leave things as they are than to risk making them worse.

Yet it is hard to see how the "old Italian" propaganda now in vogue is expected to advance the science of voice culture.

Its perennial attraction, to the profession, is however an indisputable fact. Teachers who are sincere cling to the idea for reasons set forth above. Those who are mere pretenders use the name as a badge of respectability, and the public is so accustomed to hear it referred to as a mysterious *summum bonum* of vocalization that any teacher can reassure and attract an inquirer for lessons by claiming to teach the Italian method.

Such exclusive advocacy of the old Italian method as we find in the article to which we have referred is quite comprehensible when we note the author's idea of the alternative. His descrip-

tion of the modern method would hardly recommend it to anyone. His acquaintance with exponents of it seems to have been unfortunate. He draws "a sharp contrast" between the old and the new systems, thus:

"One treated vocal cultivation as a branch of strictly musical education; the other makes it rather a system of throat gymnastics. One drew its inspiration from Nature; the other ignores Nature and turns to artifice. One appealed to musical instinct and esthetic feeling; the other places its reliance on purely physical observations of muscular movements and sensations."

He says again: "The supposed necessity of consciously guiding the vocal organs is never lost to view."

It should not be necessary to refute such statements. One might as truly suppose that the piano teacher who shows his pupil how to put the thumb under in scale playing expects him always to keep the thought of it in mind after he has progressed to concert playing.

Guiding physical action in the way which experience shows to be the best for any given purpose and expecting such action to become habitual and seem spontaneous, automatic, unconscious, "natural", is a commonplace of training.

Temporarily recognizing this, our critic of modern voice teaching makes a slight concession to its rationality thus: "When the voice has been 'placed' by the preliminary course in tone production, it should act automatically in the correct manner. . . . The technical training of the voice is then to be begun on the basis of artificially acquired habits."

Then he withdraws his concession: "But the theory seldom works out in practice. . . . It does not lead to spontaneous singing;" after which he draws the "sharp contrast" cited above, completely disposing of modernity.

There is no positive advantage claimed for the old system that is not equally in the modern when administered with reasonable intelligence. "Musicianship", the training of the ear and the mentality, is as essential to success with one as with the other method. "Strained," "throaty," "unnatural" tones are not allowed by a competent teacher of any system.

"Beautiful" tone is sought to-day as it was in days of old. Anyone who would displace "the natural use of the voice" when it is right is not a fair representative of modern teaching, which simply provides means to restore voices that have gone astray in "natural" singing, singing in which there was no guidance of the vocal mechanism.

The halo with which the old Italian method is invested in the eyes of its modern prophets seems to have escaped the observation of those who lived in the hey-day of it.

"Poor Italy" and "O ye degenerate moderns" are some of the exclamations, apropos of the singing of his time, made by Pierfrancesco Tosi in his *Observations on the Florid Song*, published in 1723. He says (Galliard's translation): "If all those who teach the first rudiments knew how to make use of this rule (concerning the upper range of tones) and to unite the feigned (falsetto) to the natural voice, there would not be now so great a scarcity of sopranos." "A diligent master . . . ought to leave no means untried so to unite the feigned and the natural voice that they may not be distinguished."

This looks like a reaching out toward the resources of modern method; at least, the one resource of beautiful tone seems to be discredited in some degree. And he actually touches upon the mechanism of tone production to the small extent of how the mouth should be held and what attitude should be assumed in order that the vocal organs may act freely.

J. B. Mancini who, fifty years later, published a book of *Practical Reflections on Florid Song*, shows still further departure from that "pure Italian method", the method which is unconscious of the vocal organs. He says: "Natural faults or those contracted under bad teaching can be eliminated only by a long course of action, the object of which is to correct the errors of the vocal organs or of the musical education." Such correction might perhaps be accomplished by the "beautiful tone" process; but Mancini shows throughout his work that he believes in some degree of physical regulation for tone.

He devotes one chapter to the arrangement of the mouth for tone, vowels and execution. He warns against cramping the throat, and says that the head should be so held that "the fibres of the throat remain soft."

Still more definite are his directions regarding the tongue. This he says should remain quiet in vocalization—and adds—this is decidedly modern—that good singers take great pains to groove the tongue for tone.

His judgment regarding imitation for pupils is that it is sometimes helpful to their progress, but that it is often prejudicial to their "own powers" and their "natural dispositions."

Like Tosi, Mancini fails to see the halo about the singing and teaching of his day. His opinion is thus expressed: "Our music is badly in decadence; we lack good schools and good singers."

So it would seem that the best each generation can do is to confess failure and lament the good old times! Here are Tosi, Mancini and our present writers with their faces toward the past assuring their contemporaries that their present efforts at progress are misdirected and futile.

This seems to be a habit of mind among theorists, justified to some extent by the mass of imaginative rubbish concerning the voice put forth in the name of progress. But it is a very unscientific habit and accords ill with the spirit of the times in other fields of endeavor.

The writer of the article which suggested the foregoing remarks withdraws his gaze for a brief moment from "the old glories of the art of *bel canto*" and glances over his shoulder at the future in his closing paragraph thus: "Some way may be found for utilizing scientific knowledge without involving the conscious direction of the vocal organs. A combination of the two systems, scientific and instinctive, may then be found to contain the most hopeful elements of a happy solution."

This happy solution should be seen as something more than a remote possibility. It will not so appear, however, to one who imagines the two systems combined in simultaneous operation. But if the bringing together of the scientific and the instinctive or inspirational methods place them in the relationship of preparation and fulfillment there need be no strain upon the imagination in foreseeing an establishment of the combination.

The "art of singing" is founded securely upon the "science of vocalization" by enough teachers and singers to demonstrate the feasibility and desirability of the combination. That it is not more generally recognized is because of the conditions of our "science." Our author, however, looks to the "possibility that the entire edifice of vocal science will ultimately be abandoned." Much of the ponderous erudition which physiologists and natural scientists would saddle upon voice culture should certainly be abandoned. As to the science which successfully guides the action of the vocal organs and brings a voice to a realization of all its resources, the need is that it be scientifically, i. e., accurately described.

At present this modern science upon which the progress of voice culture depends and which an increasing number of teachers successfully practice is obscured by the imaginative terminology and fanciful description with which it is commonly set forth.

The modern method, as a theory, will fare badly in contrast with the plausible arguments of our old Italian contemporaries

until we rescue it from the realm of sensation and place it upon a basis of fact—when talk about placing the voice in the head or the chest, directing columns of air forward or backward, etc. etc., is superseded or supplemented by statements of what really happens.